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**STATEMENT OF SENATOR EDWARD M. KENNEDY AT THE
CONGRESSIONAL BLACK CAUCUS CONFERENCE**

(As Prepared for Delivery)

I'm honored to be here with all of you, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to discuss some of the significant legislation we've been working on in the Senate. For over 35 years, the Congressional Black Caucus has fought hard and well, for the interests of millions of African Americans – and for the greater good of all Americans. You've truly lived up to your reputation as “the conscience of the Congress.” The CBC's agenda for the current Congress includes many major issues, but few, if any, are more critical than education.

In many ways, it's the defining civil rights issue of our time. On Tuesday, the nation celebrated the 50th anniversary of the court order requiring desegregation of Little Rock Central High School. We all know there's been great progress since then. But it's a national scandal that half a century later, we still don't have equal education.

The struggle for equal educational opportunity is at the heart of our march of progress, because education creates so much opportunity in all areas of American society today. It is a powerful force for increasing economic opportunity, combating residential segregation, increasing civic engagement, and fully including all our people into the fabric of American life.

When Robert Kennedy served as Attorney General, school desegregation was one of his highest priorities, because he understood so well that justice delayed is justice denied, and it's still being denied.

You and I know that civil rights is still the unfinished business of America. Formal integration alone is not enough to create equal educational opportunity. The troubling reports of racial violence and discriminatory discipline in Jena, Louisiana, are an appalling current example. But integration has been incomplete in less dramatic ways as well. Too often, for example, the tracking of students in advanced courses has reflected racial stereotypes and led to racial divisions. There is still a troubling gap in test scores of African Americans and other minorities.

Today, we're faced with many challenges, and we need stronger action on education to meet them.

After years of missed opportunities by a Republican Administration and Congress, our new Democratic Congress has made strengthening education a genuine priority.

Both the Senate and the House have passed bills to reauthorize Head Start, and we're working on getting it out of Conference soon. It's a national tragedy that after all these years, only half of all eligible children actually receive Head Start services today. We need to do more to increase enrollment and improve the quality of the programs. It's the best way to ensure that needy students arrive at school ready to learn.

In another positive action, we passed and the President signed the America COMPETES Act, which strengthens education in critical fields such as math, science, engineering, and foreign languages. The bill makes a new commitment to fund scientific research and will help ensure that our nation continues to be competitive in this new century.

Earlier today, President Bush signed a bill that strongly renews our commitment to higher education. It provides \$20 billion in student aid – the biggest increase in such aid since the GI Bill. It raises the maximum Pell Grant from \$4,300 to \$5,400 – which means that needy students can receive \$1,100 more than they currently do.

We all know how important Pell Grants are in helping African-American students attend college. In 2004, nearly 47 percent of all African-American college students received a Pell Grant – more than any other group -- and the new law means that these students' financial lifeline to college is even stronger.

The heart of the law is opportunity. It makes it easier to attend college by offering more aid, simplifying the financial aid process, and supporting states in their outreach to inform students about the importance of higher education.

It also increases opportunities after college. It reduces the interest rate on federal student loans. It caps loan payments at 15 percent of monthly income. And it forgives loans entirely for those who enter careers in public service.

It's outrageous that so many college graduates are so oppressed by heavy loan debt on their college loans that they have to give up the careers they wanted. As the Nellie Mae Foundation reported in 2003, African-American students are the most likely to be overwhelmed by their student loans. Sixty percent of African-American students reported that they felt overburdened by their education loans. Forty percent reported more hardship than they anticipated in making their loan payments. And 22 percent reported making different career choices because of their heavy debt burden.

The new law promises college graduates that if they dedicate ten years to a public service field, their student loans will be forgiven. It's an incentive for students to choose careers such as public school teachers -- law enforcement and emergency management professionals -- social workers and librarians -- prosecutors and public defenders -- public health doctors and nurses -- child care workers -- employees in non-profit groups, and many more.

The law provides an additional \$510 million for minority-serving institutions. It strengthens our commitment to students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities by providing an additional \$170 million for laboratory equipment, teaching materials, and teacher education programs. It encourages these schools to invest more in career preparation programs, such as language instruction and information technology.

Today, we have 105 Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the nation – five percent of our colleges and universities. Yet these institutions award almost 30 percent of all college degrees obtained by African Americans and in some areas of science, math, and engineering, they account for more than half of all such degrees for African Americans. H-B-C-U's are also responsible for a large number of graduate and professional degrees earned by African Americans.

The law also provides \$30 million in grant aid to an important new category of colleges – Predominantly Black Institutions. Many institutions of higher education have been ineligible for federal funds because they are not Historically Black Colleges and Universities established before the cut-off date of 1965. At least 75 more institutions, serving 265,000 students, will be eligible under this broader definition, and about 50 percent of their students are low-income or first generation college students.

The law also provides more than \$200 million to expand Upward Bound, which helps thousands of talented minority students prepare for college and succeed in college. It restores funding to almost 120 high-quality, existing Upward Bound programs that weren't initially funded this year by the Department of Education. It will also fund dozens of new Upward Bound programs in communities across America.

As you know, Upward Bound is one of the last remaining Great Society programs, and its results have been impressive:

- Nearly 90 percent of Upward Bound participants graduate from high school, compared to 68 percent of low-income students nationwide.
- Almost 70 percent of Upward Bound students attend college, compared to just 22 percent of all low-income students.
- Upward Bound students are four times more likely to obtain a college degree than students from similar backgrounds who did not participate in the program.

Upward Bound means that, students can dream larger dreams, and open doors that had been locked before. I'm so proud we were able to increase funding for this vital program, and I particularly commend Bobby Scott and all the members of the C-B-C who worked so hard to make that happen.

Finally, the law provides new opportunities for students and families to develop greater financial literacy skills, which is so important for first-generation college

students. We've provided \$130 million to establish a College Access Partnership Grant program. State agencies will partner with non-profit organizations to support new outreach activities for at-risk students, help students and families file the federal financial aid form, and provide professional development for high school guidance counselors and college financial aid administrators.

The new law renews our commitment that every student who works hard and wants to earn a college degree will be able to do so. 400,000 students today don't attend a 4-year college because they can't afford to. The law is a large down payment to close that unacceptable gap.

Through these changes, we'll create a true continuum of education that will not only help more students enter and succeed in college, but also succeed in the workforce and achieve the American Dream.

But there is much more that remains to be done. To truly create this continuum, we also need a renewed commitment to strengthening K-12 education.

When the No Child Left Behind Act became law in 2002, many states were struggling to implement standards-based reforms. Few states had high quality and fair accountability systems in place to ensure an excellent education for every child. Only four states accounted for and reported the achievement of every group of students in their schools.

No Child Left Behind made a historic commitment that every child counts – black or white, native-born or immigrant, disabled or non-disabled.

Today, thanks to the Act, all 50 states have standards that enable us to track the achievement of every group of students.

Every school now measures its progress in closing achievement gaps and getting all students to meet high standards. Schools across the country are identifying weaknesses in their instruction and documenting areas of need for their students.

Because of the No Child Left Behind Act, over 1.3 million children now have the opportunity to participate in after-school programs. 430,000 children in struggling schools receive extra tutoring and academic support.

Since its enactment, as we know, schools have faced many challenges in implementing it. By far, however, the most serious challenge is the lack of funding. There is now a cumulative shortfall of 56 billion dollars since the law was enacted. Think how much better our schools would be today if we had sent that 56 billion dollars to them and not to Iraq.

We know that other critical challenges remain. One of the most disturbing trends is the inequitable distribution of teachers. In high-poverty and high-minority schools,

students are far more likely to have inexperienced teachers, or teachers without a major in the subject they're teaching.

I know you heard from my colleague on the House Education Committee, George Miller, earlier. Reauthorizing the No Child Left Behind Act is a high priority for both of us, and we've had several hearings and meetings to learn more about the specific challenges that schools, teachers and students are facing in the classroom each day.

We know that struggling schools need greater support. We need to do more to attract and retain high-quality teachers, especially in hard-to-staff schools.

We need to improve the way we measure student progress, and provide flexibility to local communities to determine the most effective interventions in schools that are not making sufficient progress.

We need to strengthen parent and community involvement in schools, to meet students' social and developmental needs.

We need to strengthen state standards, and make sure they're aligned with the demands of our 21st century workforce.

The original Elementary and Secondary School Education Act became law in 1965, but we were slow to assess its results. A year after its enactment, I remember when my brother, Robert Kennedy, as a Senator from New York, was questioning the administration about the implementation of the act. He asked, "What happened to the children? Do you mean you spent a billion dollars -- and you don't know whether they can read or not?"

Half a century after *Brown v. Board of Education*, we're still fighting for the basic right of a good education for every child. We're still fighting against the factors that relegate many of our poorest minority students to underperforming and still largely segregated schools. There is no place for separate but equal education in America. We can't afford to let housing patterns and other factors lead to high concentrations of low-income and minority students in certain school districts. As we act on education, we can't ignore the obvious fact that our battle is more difficult because of the many ways in which race and poverty still matter in America.

Education will be as important to the next phase of the civil rights struggle as it was in the last. We cannot rest until we get it right. We need to put meaning into the Act's promise—that no child will be left behind.

For this Democratic Congress, it's a commitment we intend to keep.

I commend the Congressional Black Caucus for its leadership on this and so many other issues. Your efforts in making this nation stronger, fairer, and more inclusive are invaluable not only for African Americans, but for all Americans. You've made a huge

difference, and I know you'll keep up the great work. Thank you for all you do so well to make America America.

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